Barzakh:
The Search for an Egyptian-American Absurdism

by

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ولا تحسبن الذين قتلوا في سبيل الله أموتاً بل أحياهم عند ربابهم ورفعون.
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ABSTRACT

*Barzakh* is an original dramatic work that follows an Egyptian family of six as they prepare to pack up their belongings and leave the coastal village of Kawthar. Written in the style and tradition of Absurdism, specifically that of the Theatre of the Absurd, the play attempts to communicate the psychological violence Egyptians often experience, due to the oppression of the Egyptian state. An essay, *On Writing Barzakh*, outlines the development of the play and the influence postcolonial work had on its writing process.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work is dedicated first and foremost to every Egyptian, both in the homeland and the diaspora, who has suffered from and/or been marginalized by the violence and repression of the Egyptian state. We are still here.

This project would not have been possible without the diligent support and resources I have been privileged to receive from both my advisers and the College of Letters. I would like to thank the department for providing me with the freedom and trust to do this project with significant independence, while all the while providing me with indispensable guidance.

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For all these folks I say: وان غبت سنه، أنا برضه أنا، لا أقدر أن أساك، ولا لي غنا، ولا أتوب، عن حبك آنا.
BARZAKH

by

Hazem Fahmy
WRITER’S NOTE

On Audience:

This play is primarily intended for an English-speaking, Arab-identifying audience. This is not today that non-Arabs are excluded from the experience rather that they must understand that they are guests in someone else’s home. In other words, they are more than welcome here, so long as they take into account who this space is intended for.

To that end, no effort can be made to tone down the usage of Arabic in the play nor to provide any further context to its setting or events.

...

On Casting:

If possible, every member of the cast should be an Egyptian-identifying person. If not, they should be Arab-identifying. If not, they should be West Asian, South Asian or African-identifying. If not, they should identify as a Person of Color. Under no circumstances may a white person play any role in this play.

The actual gender of each cast member need not correspond with the gender of the character they are playing.

Whoever plays SAFIYA must also play TEITA and whoever plays MALIK must also play GEDO.
THE PLAYERS

Safiya
Amal
Malik
El Captain
Gedo (Grandpa)
Teita (Grandma)
Ahlam
[Lights up, slowly. Night time. We open on a chaotic scene; the aftermath of a great, big party. We are in the coastal village of Kawthar, to the north of the Egyptian Delta, not too far from Rashid. What remains of the festivities is scattered across the stage; confetti and tacky party hats litter the floor. There is a ginormous, birthday-style, banner that reads: “HAPPY INDEPENDENCE DAY!”, hanging above the stage. Below the banner, the Egyptian flag hangs horizontally. Up-stage is bordered by a pool, which will act as both the Mediterranean Sea and the Nile. At least one side of the pool reaches backstage so that it is possible for people and objects to enter and exit through it.

From a door in the theatre itself, not backstage, a young woman, SAFIYA, enters. She is holding a generic-looking suitcase in one hand and a book in the other. She walks towards the center of the stage where she sits on a plain bench to the side of which she places her suitcase. She is wearing a bright-red feminine galabeya and her hair is untied. Her nose is buried in a large travel guide on Egypt. We cannot necessarily see the title of the book but we can clearly see the corny Pharaonic cover; either a picture of the Pyramids of Giza or a close-up of Tutankhamen’s sarcophagus. As SAFIYA reads quietly, a corked bottle floats along the water from backstage, towards up-stage. SAFIYA looks up and looks down, before looking up again excitedly. She lets the book drop on the floor next to the bench and rushes towards the water. She takes the bottle, uncorks it, and pulls out what appears to be a ticket from inside. She observes it curiously before yelling out…]

SAFIYA
Mother!

[Enter AMAL, SAFIYA’s middle-aged mother. She is wearing a blue galabeya with a complementing head wrap (not exactly a hijab as it does not cover her neck). She is holding a household plastic tub.]

AMAL
Eh?
[SAFIYA looks at the paper in her hand, ponders for a moment, before slipping it into her clothes.]

SAFIYA
Nothing.

AMAL
Eh?

SAFIYA
I said nothing, mama.

AMAL
I heard you

SAFIYA
Walahy?

AMAL
Don’t be smart with me.

SAFIYA
Walahy.
[Beat.]
Have you packed yet?

AMAL
No, habibti, I’m already packed.

SAFIYA
Are you sure?

AMAL
I might be. Come help me.

[AMAL begins picking up the trash left by the party on stage and placing it in her tub. SAFIYA goes to the other side of the stage and picks up trash as well. Once she has a lump in her hands, she goes over to AMAL, empties the tub, and puts her trash instead. AMAL does not seem to notice. They repeat this several times. Though they pay no attention to them, neither the bottle nor SAFIYA’s book and suitcase are touched at any point in this process.]
After a while, AMAL seems to be getting frustrated at how slowly she is cleaning up the stage, but still does not notice SAFIYA’s emptying of the tub. She motions for her daughter to follow her and she walks in a circle around the stage, picking things up along the way. Every time she adds something new to the tub, SAFIYA throws something out.]

AMAL
Do you ever feel like you’re being followed?

SAFIYA
Only by the Moon.

AMAL
Eh?

SAFIYA
El Amar, ya mama.
[Beat. AMAL appears confused.]
Nevermind.

AMAL
Don’t mind if I do.

SAFIYA
Doop-da-dee-doo.

AMAL
You never liked classical music.

SAFIYA
Om Kalthoum was never my strong suit.

AMAL
I don’t like it when you sing.

SAFIYA
Neither do I.

AMAL
You have a beautiful voice.

SAFIYA
Someday, I’ll write it down.
AMAL
I can’t read.

SAFIYA
But you can smell.

[AMAL is about to speak when she stops and smells the area around her. She looks back and sees that the trash is still there. She exclaims loudly in anger, pushes SAFIYA aside and speeds around the stage, collecting every last bit of trash in her tub. Once she sees that the stage is clean, she exhales in relief, walks over to the water and dumps the contents of the tub into the sea. She then scoops the empty tub full of water and walks back over to SAFIYA.

Seeing the tub full of water, SAFIYA runs backstage and returns with a bag of laundry. They sit down backstage, SAFIYA begins pulling out blazers and dress pants from the bag and hands them to AMAL who proceeds to scrub them in the tub. Beat.]

AMAL
That was a long time ago.
[Beat]
Before you were born.

SAFIYA
But not bred.

AMAL
Oh, never.

SAFIYA
Have I ever—

AMAL
Swam?

SAFIYA
Sunk.

AMAL
Oh.
SAFIYA
But that was a long time ago.

AMAL
Oh, yes.

SAFIYA
I like the Mediterranean just fine.

AMAL
It is very central.

SAFIYA
Do you remember?

AMAL
What?

SAFIYA
When?

AMAL
Eh?

SAFIYA
Ha?

AMAL
You’re much too young for that.

SAFIYA
You age well.

AMAL
Oh, yes, I remember. What day is it today?

SAFIYA
Friday, I think.

AMAL
I know that. What’s the date?

SAFIYA
The twenty-third, I think.
AMAL
I know that. What month?

SAFIYA
[Gasps.]
It’s not Ramadan, is it?!

AMAL
I don’t think so. I can’t fast when I’m travelling.

SAFIYA
Okay. What day is it?

AMAL
I was sure it was Wednesday.

SAFIYA
Are you sure?

AMAL
I was sure.

SAFIYA
What are you now?

[Beat. AMAL lets go of the clothing she’s washing. Begins counting to herself.]

AMAL
Wahid. Etnein. Talata. Arba’a. I was right!

SAFIYA
Were you?

AMAL
I think so. What day was it again?

SAFIYA
Something tells me it’s Friday.

AMAL
Well, I know that. Did you pray today?

SAFIYA
I might have.
AMAL
What day of the month is it?

SAFIYA
It might be the twenty-second.

AMAL
Might as well be.

SAFIYA
What do you think?

AMAL
[Beat.]
I’m fairly certain it’s the twenty-fifth.

SAFIYA
Well, I know that.

AMAL
Walaxy?

SAFIYA
I don’t like swearing.

AMAL
It never liked you much, either.

SAFIYA
Ahha.

[AMAL gasps and slaps her. SAFIYA does not seem to feel pain.]

AMAL
Have you lost yourself?

SAFIYA
I can’t seem to find it.

AMAL
Let’s look for it then, dear.

[They get up.]
SAFIYA
But it’ll be morning soon.

[AMAL gasps and pulls SAFIYA down to the ground again, hushes her.]

AMAL
Not so loudly.

SAFIYA
I do not fear the Sun.

AMAL
That’s silly, have you ever seen a solar eclipse?

SAFIYA
I don’t think I have, are they friendly?

AMAL
For some people, but there are no panels here.

[They return to the laundry.]

SAFIYA
That’s why we have power plants.

AMAL
I’m not ready to go nuclear just yet.

SAFIYA
You don’t have to!

AMAL
We’re leaving at dawn.

SAFIYA
Dawn is dull.

AMAL
That’s deniable.

SAFIYA
I wouldn’t deny that.

AMAL
Get yourself a newspaper.
SAFIYA
I’d rather use the internet.

AMAL
We’ll pick up a copy before we leave.

SAFIYA
[Excitedly.]
Which one?

AMAL
Preferably one in print.

SAFIYA
I can’t write.

AMAL
I never wanted to.

SAFIYA
I want the Moon, is that too much?

AMAL
What is that?

SAFIYA
El Amar, ya mama.

AMAL
What else is there?

[Enter MALIK, SAFIYA’s younger brother. He is dressed in full beige military attire. His face is clean-shaven and his hair is cut short. He is holding a generic suitcase, identical to that of SAFIYA’s, which he sets down besides his sister’s. He enters from behind them.]

MALIK
Pompompompompompompompompompom.

[He stops. Beat. AMAL claps excitedly.]

AMAL
Again!
MALIK
Pompom.

AMAL
Again?

MALIK
Pom?

SAFIYA
[Coldly.]
Oh, hello.

MALIK
Ahlan!

AMAL
Wa-sahlan!

SAFIYA
What brings you back so soon, brother?

MALIK
To answer that question I would have to rely on pedagogical policies proposed by peoples long before our population purposed to patrol itself. See Narmer, or for more recent examples, consider Nasser’s children. I suppose a better way to put it would be to break down the oral structures of saturation for such methods prevent us from performing what prudently must be accomplished, accepting of course, the theory that we are all prudent and powerful in our own natural right. Saad Zaghloul made good points, of course, I was there. Hence, rightfully, I resign my doubts as to whether a down-to-earth duo daintily dancing on the fringes such as our frames may in fact be capable of facilitating a fathomable, if not, factual fear of the forsaken. Jahanam is not so difficult to imagine, but extraordinarily difficult to draw. This was forged elsewhere and, in earnest, I hope to hamper any further attempts to frolic in this sturdy, wet sea. I have no intention of capturing Cyprus again.

[Beat.]
SAFIYA
That wasn’t a question.

MALIK
Then I don’t have to answer.

Then I don’t have an answer.

[MALIK pulls out a box of matches. He begins lighting matches and throwing them in the water.]

AMAL
What brings you back so soon?

MALIK
Has it really been that long?

SAFIYA
We’re not actually sure.

MALIK
I came as soon as I can.

AMAL
How was the train?

MALIK
Which one?

SAFIYA
Didn’t you come from Cairo?

MALIK
No, I’m from here.

AMAL
A rural boy.

MALIK
Through and through.

AMAL
Whoop-dee-woo-woo.

SAFIYA
Are there trains in Cairo?
MALIK
Only when they want to be there.

SAFIYA
When’s that?

MALIK
Eh?

SAFIYA
Ha?

AMAL
Children! I have a headache.

SAFIYA & MALIK
But, mother-

AMAL
I can’t work like this.

[AMAL empties out the remaining water in the tub in the sea, collects the laundry and leaves. Beat. SAFIYA brings the bottle to MALIK.]

SAFIYA
I found something.

MALIK
What thing?
[She begins, he interrupts.]
What thoughtlessness! Anxiousness floods you, habibti; like waves on a spiky shore. This isn’t Alexandria.
[She begins again, and he interrupts her again.]
But if it were, I’d ask you if you wanted any ice cream. Then again, we have no time for that. We’re leaving soon.
[He throws the bottle away, she catches it before it falls.]

SAFIYA
You’re just jealous.

MALIK
Habibti, there is violence in your language.
SAFIYA
I just want the Moon back.

MALIK
Who?

SAFIYA
El Amar, ya Malik!

MALIK
Oh.
[Beat.]
The dust isn’t so bad.

SAFIYA
I don’t do cities like you.

MALIK
Just wait for the dawn.

SAFIYA
Dawn is dark.

MALIK
Perhaps the other way around?
[She almost interjects, he interrupts her.]
Preposterous. Death cannot be dawn lest we sink in the sea
and come out an island. We can talk about Cyprus, but
otherwise, I can’t say I particularly care.

SAFIYA
[Cradling the bottle.]
I miss the Red Sea.

MALIK
What’s wrong with this one?

SAFIYA
It’s too close.

MALIK
No such thing.

[She leaps up and gets uncomfortably close to him.]
SAFIYA
Remember back in seventy-three when the Israelis broke through the line?

MALIK
It was the other way around, sister.

SAFIYA
Wait.

MALIK
What?

SAFIYA
Which line?

MALIK
Depends when.

SAFIYA
[Places the bottle back besides the bench.]
What about now?

MALIK
Now?

SAFIYA
If not now, then when?

MALIK
What?

SAFIYA
Ha?

MALIK
[Laughs manically. Beat.]
The Republic calls on you, dear sister.

SAFIYA
How much will that cost me?

MALIK
Have you charged?
SAFIYA
I can’t find my charger.

MALIK
No! That’s not what I mean.

SAFIYA
That’s mean.

MALIK
[Sighs.]
Take the call.

SAFIYA
Must I?

MALIK
Yes.

[SAFIYA sighs. MALIK raises his hand to his head like a phone speaker.]

MALIK
Ring! Ring!

[Startled, SAFIYA raises her hand to answer.]

SAFIYA
Hello?

MALIK
As-salamu alaykum.

SAFIYA
Masa’ El-noor.

MALIK
Ha?

[Beat.]

SAFIYA
Let’s start over.

MALIK
Okay.
[Puts his hand in position again.]
Ring! Ring!

SAFIYA
[Startled again.]
Hello?

MALIK
Hello, yes, this is Tahrir.

SAFIYA
The Square or the Complex?

MALIK
Bit of both. We’d like to speak to Ms. Safiya, please.

SAFIYA
This is she.

MALIK
Splendid! We’re delighted to inform you your papers have been processed and your visa will be delivered to your doorstep within the week.

SAFIYA
[Legitimately confused.]
But…I haven’t applied for any visa?

MALIK
You didn’t? Well, never mind then. May we speak to your brother then?

SAFIYA
Of course.
[She hangs up and picks up the speaker again.]
Ring! Ring!

MALIK
[Picks up, startled.]
Yes?

SAFIYA
This is Tahrir, the Complex. Who am I speaking to?
MALIK
This is officer Malik.

SAFIYA
Oh, please hold. We have the wrong number.

MALIK
[Yells.]
But this is Malik!

SAFIYA
Yes, we know. We are the wrong number. One moment.  
[She turns her face away from the speaker.]  

MALIK
Yes?

SAFIYA
Yes, we know this is officer Malik.

MALIK
Is this Nasr City?

SAFIYA
Hush! You’re a captain now! No need to speak so loudly.

MALIK
Captain?! Since when?

SAFIYA
This morning. Didn’t Tahrir call you?

MALIK
Didn’t even leave a message.

SAFIYA
Well, we just got the call this morning, from someone higher up. Would you like to speak to them?

MALIK
I’d be delighted!  
[Hangs up then picks up.]  
Ring! Ring!
SAFIYA
[Picks up.]
Yes?

MALIK
Is Captain Malik there?

SAFIYA
Yes, basha! Right here.

MALIK
Please tell him we need him immediately back in Cairo.

SAFIYA
Now?

MALIK
No, you can tell him later. Good-bye.

[MALIK hangs up. SAFIYA follows suit. Beat. SAFIYA plays with her galabeya, looks at her nails. MALIK lights and throws another match.]

SAFIYA
I think they want you back in Cairo.

MALIK
Why didn’t you say before! I’ll be off now. Salam.

SAFIYA
Salam is usually better.

[MALIK is about to exit when AMAL enters from backstage and stands in his way. She is holding an identical generic suitcase in one hand and a bag of sunflower seeds in the other.]

AMAL
Habibi, do you have a jacket?

MALIK
Mother, do you know what season it is?

AMAL
[Beat.]
Not really.
[She begins eating the seeds.]
But you never know when a storm could hit.

SAFIYA
Ha?

AMAL
A storm is a violent disturbance of the atmosphere, with strong winds and usually rain, thunder, lightning, or snow. But there is no snow in the Arab Republic of Egypt so we have to make do with the thunder the lightning and the rain, rumbling down on us, ramifications for the relished.

[AMAL walks over to SAFIYA. She puts her suitcase next to her children’s, sits on the bench with SAFIYA and they loudly eat the seeds together, throwing the shells on the ground.]

MALIK
Silence is revolting.

SAFIYA
Revolutionary.

AMAL
Really?

SAFIYA
Mother-

AMAL
Monster.

SAFIYA
More?

AMAL
Morbid!

MALIK
Too morose, I think.

AMAL
[Nods.]
Thoroughly.
[Beat.]

SAFIYA
What a thoughtless day.

AMAL
Dawn is almost here.

SAFIYA
Dawn is done.

MALIK
Not always.

[Beat. They continue to eat loudly.]

SAFIYA
I don’t care much for rhetoric.

MALIK
Hush.

AMAL
I hear it, too.

MALIK
Such violence.

AMAL
Help me, yabny.

MALIK
I will till my bones chill, yamma.

AMAL
Excellent! Get me out of here.

[AMAL hands the bag of seeds to SAFIYA and gets up to stand behind MALIK. He pulls out a gun. With his arms around AMAL, he escorts her off-stage.]

MALIK
[To SAFIYA, as he leaves.]
Stay safe, sister. It’s a dangerous day.
[They exit. SAFIYA continues eating the seeds. Beat. Suddenly, an inflatable boat is hurled onto the water. She is not shocked by this. Moments after, EL CAPTAIN, SAFIYA’s middle-aged father, enters through the water following his boat. He sports a white disheveled navy captain’s attire, with a great shaggy beard and a tattered navy captain’s hat. He is also holding an identical generic suitcase which he adds to the pile of his family. He climbs up on stage and examines his surroundings.]

EL CAPTAIN
Masr!

SAFIYA
Masr.

EL CAPTAIN
Tahya Masr!
[Beat.]
This is the village of Kawthar, yes?

SAFIYA
I think so.

[He tries to bring his boat out of the water, but struggles greatly. He continues talking as he tries to do this.]

EL CAPTAIN
Kawthar.

SAFIYA
Cordially.

EL CAPTAIN
Click.

SAFIYA
Click.

EL CAPTAIN
Click. Click.

SAFIYA
Click. Click.
EL CAPTAIN
Click.

SAFIYA
Click?

EL CAPTAIN
Remarkable. Your naval navigation is most impressive. Where did you learn?

SAFIYA
My father taught me.

[He finally pulls the boat out of the water.]

EL CAPTAIN
Enchanté.
[Beat.]
Did I?

SAFIYA
Yes. You took me to the water and wouldn’t let me leave. This is why I hate the Sun.

EL CAPTAIN
And the Moon?

SAFIYA
All the same.

EL CAPTAIN
I don’t like similarities.

SAFIYA
El Amar, ya baba!

EL CAPTAIN
Never heard of him.
[Beat.]
Do you still live here?

SAFIYA
Does anyone live anywhere?

EL CAPTAIN
Don’t get historical on me, young lady.
SAFIYA
If I was being historical I would’ve told you that Mohamed
Naguib was put under house arrest in 1954.

EL CAPTAIN
People exaggerate all the time.

SAFIYA
Vraiment?

EL CAPTAIN
Avec plaisir.

SAFIYA
[Points to the bottle.]
Do you know anything about this?

EL CAPTAIN
How long has it been there?

SAFIYA
Does it matter?

EL CAPTAIN
Time teems with torturous tumbles. I don’t miss Suez. Did
you know I rode the sea till it called my name? Friends
find me easily. Ha! Chinese cell phones can try and invade
the market all they want. Courant dans la rue sans
couleurs. I am a pilot of the pantomime, but only when its
pertinent. For example, given my obsession with grilled
fish, I am now out of my element, but I’m also enriched by
this enigma. Enthralled. Encompassed.

[Points to the bottle.]
Behold a palm tree, did you know it was there?

SAFIYA
Sometimes I hear whispers in the night.

EL CAPTAIN
[Upset.]
I am your father.

SAFIYA
[Gets up.]
Would you like a tour of our village? We have fascinating
sights and rich history. You can find whatever you’re looking for here, even yourself.

EL CAPTAIN
I’ve been looking for some Greeks. Alexander doesn’t count.

SAFIYA
Well, not really.

EL CAPTAIN
Really?

SAFIYA
Unless you count Cleopatra.

[They laugh manically. Beat.]

EL CAPTAIN
I found myself a long time ago and it was not a pleasant experience.

SAFIYA
Mother says I was born under moonlight.

EL CAPTAIN
Oh, did she?

SAFIYA
[She sits back down.]
The tide is cruel.

[EL CAPTAIN appears hesitant, as though he is about to say something. Is about to speak then stops. Beat.]

EL CAPTAIN
[Rapidly.]
I submerge my hands in sea water every day or so. My old ‘hawi said the salt will heal us, hydrogen and hormones. Horoscope for the hungry. I clasp them and wish for a better morning, a more moderate sun, yet wake up on my back the sky barking in my face.

SAFIYA
Better than a dog.
EL CAPTAIN
Better than a door.

SAFIYA
They say water will be the end of us, but we’re already made out of sixty percent water, so I wonder what’s the difference.

EL CAPTAIN
[Gasps.]
I’ll tell you about difference!
[He huddles close to her.]
Have you ever noticed how seagulls and sparrows suck on the same earth worm, but not with the same beak?
[Beat.]
Have you ever seen a Carcinus aestuarii and Pagurus bernhardus fight for the same house?
[SAFIYA begins to answer, he cuts her off].
I think not! Because the former makes its own house while the latter carries it, like a burden, burning for the ages. Agile beings all around. Lupus. Felines. Galloping with the wind and worse, they howl at the Moon and I moan for my helplessness.

[In anger, he kicks his own boat. SAFIYA does not react.]

SAFIYA
Helplessness is in the method.

EL CAPTAIN
[Laughs manically.]
I know only of merchants.

[Beat.]

SAFIYA
I like looking to the sea.

EL CAPTAIN
The sea sees all.

SAFIYA
Such is water.
[Beat.]
What’s it like beyond the sea?

EL CAPTAIN
Beyond all you can see.

[Enter GEDO, SAFIYA’s grandfather. He is dressed in a long, brown male galabeya, and a matching thick wool beanie. He is wearing large black sunglasses, but it is not actually clear whether or not he can see. In one hand he holds a cane and in the other an unlit shisha. It is important that it be clear that he is being played by the same actor as MALIK, but that he is also a markedly different character.]

GEDO
Did somebody say: “Beyond all you can see”?

SAFIYA
Gedo!
[She puts aside the bag of seeds and rushes to hug him.]
Can I help you with anything?

GEDO
Yes, dear, please relieve me of this cane.

[She takes the cane from him and guides him with his now free hand towards the bench. She lays the cane by the bench.]

GEDO
Could you get me a light as well?

SAFIYA
Hadir.

[She rushes off-stage. GEDO and EL CAPTAIN are left alone. Beat.]

EL CAPTAIN
Are you hungry?

GEDO
[Holds up the arm of his shisha.]
I have apples.
EL CAPTAIN
Not watermelons?

GEDO
It’s not the season.

EL CAPTAIN
It never is.

GEDO
That’s not true. We had seasons in my time.

EL CAPTAIN
I don’t care much for monarchy.

GEDO
No one does anymore.

EL CAPTAIN
How do you feel about parliamentary republics?

GEDO
I feel alright.

EL CAPTAIN
Salamtak.

GEDO
El Afw.

[From backstage, SAFIYA audibly sneezes.]

GEDO & EL CAPTAIN
Bless you!

[Beat.]

EL CAPTAIN
Where’s your suitcase?

GEDO
Can’t seem to find any.

EL CAPTAIN
Why are you here?
GEDO
I was about to ask you the same.

EL CAPTAIN
[Upset.]
You are my father.

GEDO
Well, that makes one of us.

EL CAPTAIN
Are we together?

GEDO
Not for long.

[Enter SAIFYA. In one hand she holds a handle of ice cubes and in the other a pair of tongs. She carefully places the cubes on GEDO’s shisha.]

GEDO
Thank you, dear. There is but one truly serious philosophical problem.

SAFIYA
[Sitting down beside him.]
Piracy?

GEDO
Yes! Consider the Somali Pirates. They have no way to make it up so far up the Red Sea, yet they occupy so much of the imagination.

EL CAPTAIN
I don’t care much for imagination.

GEDO
[Smoking his shisha.]
Well, you don’t care much for anything.

EL CAPTAIN
That’s not true.

GEDO
Your boat doesn’t count.
EL CAPTAIN
Fine.

SAIFIYA
Gedo, do you have any presents for me?

GEDO
No, habibti, you’re much too old for that.

SAIFIYA
[Upset.]
But you’re much too young.

GEDO
This is true, I don’t have much time to waste. In fact, I must be leaving.

SAIFIYA
Okay, will I see you next Friday?

GEDO
Only if it’s not Wednesday.
[He picks up his cane and shisha and walks over to the boat.]
Give me a ride, yabny.

[EL CAPTAIN rushes over and helps GEDO get into the boat. He then pushes it from behind off-stage.]

GEDO
Salam!

[Safiya returns to the bag of seeds. Beat. Enter AHLAM. Clad in full makeup, she is dressed in a dark pencil skirt and a deep blue blouse. She has a red satchel slung around her shoulder and a matching bright red suitcase which she puts down, but keeps by her side.]

AHLAM
You’re still here?

SAIFIYA
Looks like it.
AHLAM
I won’t look.

SAFIYA
You don’t have to.

AHLAM
Neither do you.

[Beat.]

SAFIYA
Would you like a party hat?

AHLAM
Sure.

[SAFIYA looks around and realizes that she cleared them all earlier.]

SAFIYA
It doesn’t look like I have anything.

AHLAM
That’s okay. I have one.

[AHLAM pulls a party hat out of her satchel and hands it to SAFIYA.]

SAFIYA
Thank you.

[She puts it on AHLAM’s head, steps back and looks at her.]

Much better.

SAFIYA
I thought I did once, as well.

AHLAM
It doesn’t matter.

SAFIYA
Are you sure?
AHLAM
I’m sure the Nile flows from Uganda.

SAFIYA
It was Ethiopia last month.

AHLAM
No, that didn’t last long. I want to believe in meteorology.

SAFIYA
I want to want you again.

AHLAM
What’s stopping you?

SAFIYA
The wind’s strong today. We might get rain later.

AHLAM
I won’t be here to see it. Bother.

SAFIYA
Do you get bothered anymore?

AHLAM
Not so much. Maybe. In the morning.

SAFIYA
I haven’t seen the morning, yet.

AHLAM
I hope you don’t.

SAFIYA
Do you?

AHLAM
Dawn is coming.

SAFIYA
Dawn is–

AHLAM
It’s not.
SAFIYA
No?

AHLAM
I suppose not. I prefer AK-47’s to M16’s.

SAFIYA
What do you support?

AHLAM
I’ll tell you next year.

SAFIYA
Who do you support?

AHLAM
Have you been to Downtown?

SAFIYA
Which one?

AHLAM
Whichever’s further south, I guess. I have something for you.

SAFIYA
Yes! I almost forgot.

AHLAM
So did I.

[She reaches into her satchel and pulls out a corked bottle, similar to the one SAFIYA found earlier.]

Here.

[Safiya uncorks the bottle and looks inside; it appears empty.]

SAFIYA
It appears empty.

AHLAM
[Surprised.]

It is?

[She takes the bottle from SAFIYA and looks through the
Such a waste.

SAFIYA

The garbage man doesn’t come any more.

[She moves towards the pool, sits on the edge and dips her legs in the water.]

Where were you?

[AHLAM picks up her bottle and sits next to SAFIYA.]

AHLAM

When?

SAFIYA

Whenever.

AHLAM

I lost my memory, I suppose. It happened so quickly after I left.

SAFIYA

So you did leave?

AHLAM

What makes you say that?

[Beat.]

I looked for you, you know.

SAFIYA

I don’t care much for Europe.

AHLAM

Neither do I, anymore.

SAFIYA

I wasn’t there.

AHLAM

Where were you?

SAFIYA

Here, I suppose.

AHLAM

I wish you were.
SAFIYA
Walahy?

AHLAM
I’ll miss you. When are you leaving?

SAFIYA
Soon. I’m worried I haven’t packed enough, though.

AHLAM
Smell your clothes.

SAFIYA
[Does.]
What about them?

AHLAM
Think of your parents.

SAFIYA
I try.

AHLAM
Think of your brother.

SAFIYA
Do I have to?

AHLAM
[Throws her bottle into the water.]
See?

SAFIYA
That’s the river.

AHLAM
You don’t see?

SAFIYA
I hear more than anything these days.

AHLAM
Listen to the radio every once in a while. They have English commentary now.
SAFIYA
Begad?

AHLAM
Ah, walahy.

SAFIYA
Auzubillah.

AHLAM
Don’t get poetic on me now.

SAFIYA
If I’d wanted to get poetic, I would’ve told you Darwish is a hack.

AHLAM
Hold my hand.

SAFIYA
[Does. Beat.]
I don’t want much anymore.

AHLAM
That’s not true.

SAFIYA
It is true that Farouk wanted a talk with the Germans.

AHLAM
How would you know?

[SAFIYA jerks her hand away and gets up. She walks away crossing her arms.]

SAFIYA
I have to go. Rock the boat. Big time.
[Beat. Turns towards AHLAM.]
Come with me?

AHLAM
Sure, but you can’t ask any questions.

SAFIYA
I don’t like answers. They dry my throat.
AHLAM
Would you like a drink?

SAFIYA
Yes, a glass of water, please.
[AHLAM motions to the water.]
No, not that kind.

AHLAM
What else can we break?

SAFIYA
[Thinks for a moment.]
Have you ever been to Sinai?

AHLAM
Wouldn’t dream of it.

[SAFIYA picks up the first bottle from the floor and begins picking up strewn-about seed shells and putting them in it.]

SAFIYA
What about Luxor?

AHLAM
Loathsome.

SAFIYA
Legitimate.

AHLAM
I feel really rattled.

SAFIYA
Do you want some wine?

AHLAM
[Excitedly.]
Always!

SAFIYA
I don’t have any.
AHLAM
[Sincerely.] 
Thank you.

SAFIYA
Of course.

AHLAM
Cheers.

SAFIYA
Keep your eyes on the prize.

AHLAM
I’m sorry you had to see that.

SAFIYA
I’ve seen enough.

AHLAM
[Gets up and nears towards SAFIYA.] Not quite.

SAFIYA
Take a deep breath.

AHLAM
Okay.

SAFIYA
Why are you getting so upset?

AHLAM
Change the subject.

SAFIYA
Go for it.

AHLAM
Okay, are you making healthy choices?

SAFIYA
I have turned enough leaves over in my life for a forest, or at least an oasis.
AHLAM
We’re a long way from Toshka.

SAFIYA
Always have been.

AHLAM
I did what I did.

SAFIYA
I didn’t.

AHLAM
It wasn’t your choice.

SAFIYA
Nor yours.

AHLAM
You wouldn’t know.

SAFIYA
You don’t know what I know.

AHLAM
I know you don’t know what I know.

SAFIYA
Thank you.

AHLAM
I know I shouldn’t.

SAFIYA
I tell myself to stop thinking about you.

AHLAM
You can’t think of what you don’t expect.

SAFIYA
What should I have expected?

AHLAM
Healthy choices.
SAFIYA
Did you make one?

AHLAM
I think so.

SAFIYA
And here we are.

AHLAM
And there we were.

SAFIYA
You left and I laughed.

AHLAM
Really?

SAFIYA
Who is your favorite president?

AHLAM
Oh, I don’t know, I liked Fouad just fine. Who’s the current one?

SAFIYA
I’m not a newspaper.

AHLAM
If you were, which one would you be?

SAFIYA
Any one works fine really.

AHLAM
I hear they come in different sizes now.

SAFIYA
It all fits just the same.

AHLAM
How’s your brother?

SAFIYA
Alive.
AHLAM
Well?

SAFIYA
Well, what?

AHLAM
What about your father?

SAFIYA
Both seem to be doing fine. But I haven’t seen much of them lately.

AHLAM
Why is that?

SAFIYA
I’m mostly here with you.

AHLAM
Most definitely.

SAFIYA
Indubitably.

AHLAM
Impossible.

SAFIYA
Why?

AHLAM
I can’t be what you need of me.

SAFIYA
I need nothing.

AHLAM
Not here.

SAFIYA
Not now.

AHLAM
Dawn is coming soon.
SAFIYA
Do you have a plane to catch?

AHLAM
That’s the wrong question. You never knew how to look for answers.

SAFIYA
I find them in shells, but also seeds. It really depends, or at least it should.

AHLAM
Shush.

SAFIYA
Shout.

AHLAM
Shoulder.

SAFIYA
Shield.

AHLAM
Shining.

SAFIYA
Shimmering.

AHLAM
Close your eyes.

[SAFIYA does. AHLAM moves in towards her and kisses her on the cheek softly. SAFIYA keeps her eyes closed. AHLAM exits. SAFIYA opens her eyes and does not react to AHLAM’s absence. Beat. She exits. Enter MALIK followed closely by AMAL. He appears nervous. AMAL is holding the same tub as before, but this time it is filled with the clothes she had been washing. As she walks around the stage, she lays them on the ground.]

AMAL
What do you mean the train didn’t leave?
MALIK
I never said that.

AMAL
What did you say?

MALIK
I forget.

AMAL
Well, you’re still here.

MALIK
Yes, the train didn’t leave.

AMAL
Well, why didn’t you say that earlier?

MALIK
I didn’t have time, the train didn’t leave.

AMAL
Malik, habibi, they are calling for you and I asked them what they needed but they didn’t answered and now I am here looking for you, but really I am looking for the shoreline, but really I am looking for a labor I can liken to the history I found the other day under my bed sheets.

MALIK
[Beat.]
Are you well, mother?

AMAL
Yes, dear. They are calling for you.

[MALIK begins folding the clothes AMAL has thrown on the floor, but does not pick them up.]

MALIK
Can they take a message?

AMAL
I’m afraid not. They can’t write.

MALIK
Can they speak?
AMAL
I’m not sure.

MALIK
Should I go?

AMAL
Only if you want to.

MALIK
I am a captain now.

AMAL
Mind you-

MALIK
It doesn’t matter.

AMAL
Only if it has to.

MALIK
I love you, mother, but sometimes I am truly sundered.

AMAL
You and me both.

MALIK
It must be the Sun.

AMAL
Sometimes.

MALIK
Somewhat.

AMAL
Have you seen your father?

MALIK
Who?

AMAL
El Captain.
MALIK
Me?

AMAL
The other one.

MALIK
[Without pointing in any direction.]
Him?

AMAL
Not that one either.

MALIK
[In the same tone and gesturing.]
Him?

AMAL
I suppose.

MALIK
I think Safiya did. She told me he went to Cairo looking for a government.

AMAL
I have a government.

MALIK
As do I.

AMAL
Oh, me too.

[EL CAPTAIN enters.]

EL CAPTAIN
I remember when I had a government.

[AMAL gasps. She rushes towards EL CAPTAIN and pushes him to the ground. MALIK yells in fear and attempts to hide behind the bench.]

AMAL
Where were you!
EL CAPTAIN
[Standing up without much reaction.]
Out at sea, dear.

AMAL
A likely story.

EL CAPTAIN
I found myself in the water again.

AMAL
Well, at least you found something.

EL CAPTAIN
Have you forgotten?

AMAL
Gone is the goulash.

EL CAPTAIN
I used to be rustic, face majestic with the sight of a fresh beard. Look at me now, body bent by the weight of the water. Salt coming out of everywhere. Hasbi-Allahu wa Ni'ma Al-Wakil. My nose smelled the sea once, now it only finds bitterness.

AMAL
Bottomless.

EL CAPTAIN
Love me again, Amal. Do you remember those days?

AMAL
I remember when they told us about Sadat. I didn’t know what to think.

EL CAPTAIN
The water will wash you off fine.

AMAL
The water washes nothing. Cleanliness is for the clandestine. I find clarity in this state.

EL CAPTAIN
I find solace in mine.
Mingled.

AMAL

Mammoth.

EL CAPTAIN

I mouthed the sun as you sped off.

AMAL

Solemnly.

EL CAPTAIN

I know of different waters, dear. Depth so delirious, they distill you.

AMAL

Dastardly.

EL CAPTAIN

Indefinitely.

AMAL

I don’t think so.

EL CAPTAIN

But I know so.

AMAL

This is the land of the roosting. Birds call to me in the morning and I throw my footwear back. In return, they cry for me, lay their tired bodies outside my window. Once, I held a nightingale in my arms and asked it to love me like my children once did. It gasped and groped, but I was stronger. Now you know why we never walk on graves, why the sand is also unforgiving.

EL CAPTAIN

Please, dear, I don’t like it when you talk politics.

AMAL

Neither do I. I also don’t care much for the economy.
EL CAPTAIN
I did, elsewhere.

AMAL
Not there.

EL CAPTAIN
Nor here.

AMAL
Anywhere.

EL CAPTAIN
Even here.

AMAL
Heroic.

EL CAPTAIN
Harmony.

AMAL
Hardly.

[She begins unfolding the clothes on the ground, answering him as she does this.]

EL CAPTAIN
Harrowingly.

AMAL
Hither.

EL CAPTAIN
I loved you once, habibti.

AMAL
Logical leanings. Lurid lessons.

EL CAPTAIN
No, not like that.

AMAL
Lingering lasting. Lower losses.
EL CAPTAIN
No.

AMAL
Northern Neanderthal. Night nestlings.

EL CAPTAIN
Amal, no.

AMAL
Never noted. Notorious national.

EL CAPTAIN
[Shouts.]
No!

AMAL
[Startled.]
Well, you don’t have to get all worked up about it.

EL CAPTAIN
I worked once and it was not a good time.

AMAL
Factory. Farm. Seaport.

EL CAPTAIN
I swam for days, you know.

AMAL
Years, actually.

EL CAPTAIN
Yearning.

AMAL
Youth.

EL CAPTAIN
What for?

AMAL
Fortitude.

EL CAPTAIN
Fatherhood.
AMAL
Of the sort.

EL CAPTAIN
Swish.

AMAL
Swash.

[They hold each other and begin dancing, twirling around the stage. MALIK is still hiding behind the bench. Beat. Enter TEITA, SAFIYA’s grandmother. She is dressed in a flowing light blue galabeya, with her hair in a loose hijab. She holds the same cane as GEDO’s, but actually uses it. As with GEDO, we can see that she is being played by the same actor playing SAFIYA, but that this is also a different character.]

TEITA
I heard music here.

[AMAL and EL CAPTAIN continue dancing, going around TEITA as they speak with her.]

AMAL
We were so quiet, mother.

EL CAPTAIN
Did you make a sound, dear?

AMAL
If I did, I didn’t hear it.

TEITA
What about that child over there?

AMAL
Which one?

TEITA
I don’t know. I can never tell them apart.

EL CAPTAIN
Child!

[MALIK rushes over and embraces TEITA.]
MALIK
Teita!

TEITA
[Hugging him back.]
Are you hungry?

[AMAL and EL CAPTAIN stop dancing.]

AMAL
I don’t think that’s such a good idea.

MALIK
But, mother—

EL CAPTAIN
[To MALIK.]
Listen to your mother.

TEITA
She never does.

AMAL
You wouldn’t remember.

TEITA
Habibti, Mahfouz’s work will be dust in ten-thousand years and his name will be forgotten.

EL CAPTAIN
I should sure hope so.

MALIK
So what?

TEITA
He’s just jealous.
[She pulls out a wrapped candy from her pockets and hands it to MALIK.]
Here.

[MALIK excitedly unwraps the candy and eats it.]

EL CAPTAIN
Merci.
TEITA
Not today.

AMAL
Tomorrow?

TEITA
Don’t let me start with you.

EL CAPTAIN
Then end.

MALIK
I don’t like your tone.

EL CAPTAIN
I can see from your medals.

MALIK
Don’t meddle with me.

EL CAPTAIN
I’d dare not.

MALIK
Teita, would you like to leave with us?

TEITA
I’d rather stay without you.

MALIK
How about we go for a swim then?

TEITA
You’re much too young for that, dear.

MALIK
It’s perfectly legal.

AMAL
I don’t care for politics.

EL CAPTAIN
I did.
TEITA
Movements fail all the time, dear, it’s not your fault.

EL CAPTAIN
I blame the government.

AMAL
Which one?

EL CAPTAIN
I’m not sure, actually. I haven’t seen Cairo in years.

MALIK
Oh, I was just there.

EL CAPTAIN
How was that like?

MALIK
Fine, thank you very much. They made me captain. Are you proud?

EL CAPTAIN
As a pickle, soaking in juice. I’ve always loved a good plate of torshy. This is the happiest news I could’ve received today.

MALIK
Thank you very much. You are too kind.

TEITA
Ah, but what kind?

MALIK
[Stands up straight.]
Military.

EL CAPTAIN
[Follows suit.]
Myself, I am nautical.

MALIK
Ah, man of the sea?

EL CAPTAIN
Sea of man.
AMAL
Everything in between.

TEITA
I’d rather be on the edge.

EL CAPTAIN
Egged?

MALIK
Where are your medals? Let me go get them.

[EL CAPTAIN is about to exit to retrieve his medals, but MALIK interrupts him.]

MALIK
I rode on a boat once.

EL CAPTAIN
How was that like?

MALIK
Rocky. I remember the waves were not too pleased.

EL CAPTAIN
Perhaps you upset them.

MALIK
Perhaps, but perhaps my captain was not very good.

EL CAPTAIN
[Angrily.]
How dare you? I have never been more insulted.

[AMAL moves towards EL CAPTAIN and attempts to soothe him.]

MALIK
I have never been more insular.

[TEITA does the same for MALIK.]

EL CAPTAIN
Do you even know what it means to be a captain, child? You got your promotion yesterday and you think you can compare.
MALIK
I compare nothing except that which is before me. Sometimes
also what’s behind me.

[The tension escalates.]

EL CAPTAIN
Don’t be a fool. The sea is behind me.

MALIK
I disagree. I believe I am over it.

TEITA
I wish I could be over the sea!

AMAL
Don’t we all!

TEITA
You don’t, dear.

AMAL
Don’t I?

EL CAPTAIN
No, dear.

AMAL
[Lets go of EL CAPTAIN.]
Dead dogma.

MALIK
[Tries to soothe AMAL.]
Dearth.

TEITA
In dirt.

EL CAPTAIN
Demise to those who would demote me.

MALIK
A real captain would never fear such trivialities.

EL CAPTAIN
Easy for you to say, you’re not one.
[They’re close to exchanging blows now.]

MALIK
Am too!

EL CAPTAIN
Amorous. Saying it doesn’t make it so.

MALIK
Acting it doesn’t do much better.

EL CAPTAIN
Bothersome!

MALIK
Bewailed.

EL CAPTAIN
You can find me on the sea, sir. Then we’ll see what’s what.

AMAL
What?

TEITA
Worrisome.

AMAL
Wanting.

EL CAPTAIN
I tire of this wanton aggression.

MALIK
Assertive.

EL CAPTAIN
[Angrily.]
Have you ever felt the cool steel of a ship as she carries you on her hard back through the raging Mediterranean? I sure haven’t. I hear it’s quite an experience.

MALIK
[Angrily.]
Have you ever fought in the trenches of Sinai or Yemen,
struggling to survive while eliminating your enemy? I’d like to. I hear it’s quite exciting.

TEITA
Exceptional. Quite the exuberance.

EL CAPTAIN
I have more of that in my hat than this fool does in all of his uniform.

MALIK
I have more uniform on this body than this idiot has in his entire boat.

[TEITA is visibly shaking from the exchange at this point. She moves around attempting to get away from the screaming.]

EL CAPTAIN
Bastard!

[AMAL is now between them.]

MALIK
Bozo!

EL CAPTAIN
Backhanded!

MALIK
Brat!

AMAL
Archetype!

EL CAPTAIN
Amicable!

MALIK
Amphibian!

EL CAPTAIN
Phosphorous phony!

MALIK
Futuristic feline!
AMAL
Fathomless!

TEITA
Stop!

[Everyone halts besides TEITA. She rips off her hijab and becomes SAFIYA again. Without saying anything, she motions for everyone to leave. They nod and silently leave. SAFIYA is about to exit as well, but looks back at the stage before she does. As she sighs, AHLAM rushes on stage and they crash into each other.]

SAFIYA
Oh, hello.

AHLAM
Hell, oh.

SAFIYA
Hell.

AHLAM
Oh.

SAFIYA
How is the Moon?

AHLAM
You mean El Amar?

SAFIYA
How should I know?

AHLAM
Same old, same old.

SAFIYA
Mold.

AHLAM
Everywhere.

SAFIYA
Even here.
AHLAM
Especially here.

SAFIYA
A herd.

AHLAM
Heard what?

SAFIYA
Your voice. In the waves.

AHLAM
I called for you.

SAFIYA
Like the wind.

AHLAM
Welded with the sea.

SAFIYA
On and on again.

AHLAM
Yes.

SAFIYA
Jest.

AHLAM
Not so much.

SAFIYA
Just enough.

AHLAM
Exactly.

SAFIYA
Tentatively.

AHLAM
Always.
SAFIYA
You keep coming back.

AHLAM
You keep saying that.

SAFIYA
Have you seen the population census? I have no place for you here.

AHLAM
Nor I you.

SAFIYA
Nor you nor I.

AHLAM
I’ve missed you, Safiya.

SAFIYA
I’ve missed the wind and the wailing.

AHLAM
You wail enough on your own time.

SAFIYA
[Hops across the stage.]
Is that true?

AHLAM
I check in on you sometimes.

SAFIYA
Somewhere.

AHLAM
No. Here.

SAFIYA
A herd.

AHLAM
No! Here!

SAFIYA
Herald. Have you heard the news lately?
AHLAM
Noteworthy.

SAFIYA
Nothing.

[They begin running laps around the stage.]

AHLAM
Have you swallowed salt recently?

SAFIYA
I don’t have water. I fed on dawn.

AHLAM
Dawn was dull.

SAFIYA
Is it not anymore?

AHLAM
As are you.

SAFIYA
Azure and assured.

AHLAM
Of what?

SAFIYA
Of the moon and the waves. Of a farfetched place.

AHLAM
You rhyme when you’re nervous.

SAFIYA
And you lie when you’re not.

AHLAM
Noted.

SAFIYA
Morbid.

AHLAM
More morphed.
Safiya
Were you?

Ahlam
I suppose.

Safiya
What sent you?

Ahlam
What bent you?

Safiya
Sand.

Ahlam
No.

Safiya
Summer.

Ahlam
Neither.

Safiya
Perhaps a whisper.

[She stops. Beat. Ahlam stops.]

Do you ever wonder if you’re a pebble by the sea floor?

[Ahlam is about to respond, Safiya cuts her off.]

Personally, I prefer rivers.

Ahlam
For what do I owe the pleasure.

Safiya
[Hopping across stage.]

Pleasantry only got me so far.

Ahlam
Enough with me.

[They steadily walk closer to each other.]

Safiya
You were never far.
AHLAM
Further.

SAFIYA
Father.

AHLAM
Fathom.

SAFIYA
Phantom.

AHLAM
Found.

SAFIYA
At last.

AHLAM
I’ve missed you, habibti.

[It seems as though they are about to kiss, but SAFIYA walks away.]

SAFIYA
For some time now, I have been pondering the possibilities of investment, of turning some odd hundred acres of sand into some odd hundred moneys. Preferably in pounds, but yens may also work. For example, I can move into any fringe neighborhood of any city, let’s say Port Said, and, next thing you know, I am being followed.

AHLAM
[Getting excited.]
There’s always something or the other!

SAFIYA
[Thinks for a second, gets demotivated.]
What use is it now? I am here. You are there.

AHLAM
And I have not a single care.

[AHLAM approaches SAFIYA. She gives AHLAM her back.]
SAFIYA
Caress.

[AHLAM gives her a back massage.]

AHLAM
Coffin.

SAFIYA
That’s not how we say it here.

AHLAM
Taboot.

SAFIYA
Taboo

AHLAM
Not necessarily.

SAFIYA
But indefinitely.

AHLAM
Time passes faster than I remember.

SAFIYA
Have you been to Suez?

AHLAM
I’m not a ship.

SAFIYA
I’m still breathing.

AHLAM
I’m glad.

SAFIYA
Gallant.

AHLAM
Garden.

SAFIYA
Unguarded. Oh! Can we plant white roses?
AHLAM
Surely anyone can.

SAFIYA
But we need water.

AHLAM
What do you want?

SAFIYA
[Spreading her arms dramatically.]
Worldliness.

AHLAM
Such a difficult way to die.

[SAFIYA turns around to face AHLAM. They hold each other and kiss. Beat. They move apart.]

SAFIYA
What day is it today?

AHLAM
I had my ticket set for Friday.

SAFIYA
But you’re still here.

AHLAM
Yes, it must be Wednesday then.

SAFIYA
You should leave.

AHLAM
Should I go left?

SAFIYA
I don’t care much for directions.

AHLAM
I’ll buy you a compass someday.

[AHLAM exits. SAFIYA sits down on the bench and continues eating the seeds. Enter MALIK with a small radio under his arm. He does not notice that SAFIYA is wearing the same
galabeya as TEITA now. He sits down next to her, neither looks at the other. Beat.]

MALIK
Radio?

SAFIYA
Ooh! I wonder what’s on?

MALIK
The lights. Somewhere. Somehow.

SAFIYA
They must have paid their electric bills.

MALIK
Who?

SAFIYA
Ha?

MALIK
It’s on!

[They both huddle by the radio waiting for something to play. A loud static sound is heard. They listen for several moments before MALIK changes the channel. They do the same but this time SAFIYA changes the channel.]

MALIK
No use?

SAFIYA
No me’s either.

MALIK
I’d rather not.

SAFIYA
I know me already.

MALIK
So do I.

[He changes the channel again. Fairuz’s “Shat El-Iskinderiya” (Coast of Alexandria) comes on, and they
listen intently for a few beats before turning the radio off.]

SAFIYA
Coast.

MALIK
Coaxed.

[They begin tapping each other’s palms as though playing a schoolyard game.]

SAFIYA
Shore.

MALIK
Sure.

SAFIYA
Sea.

MALIK
Seed.

SAFIYA
River.

MALIK
Render.

SAFIYA
There.

MALIK
[Gets up furiously.]
I don’t want to play this game anymore.

SAFIYA
But we always play it! Every Tuesday you stop by my bench with your radio and we listen to Fairuz and the wind-

MALIK
This is serious.

[Beat.]
What day is it today?
SAFIYA
I hope it’s not Saturday.

MALIK
Are you keeping the Sabbath?

SAFIYA
I’m a Friday kind of girl.

MALIK
I would.

SAFIYA
I word.

MALIK
[Approaches the water.]
Have you tasted the water this morning? I found life in my
gurgling. I spat it out and the world spoke through me.

SAFIYA
Throw me.

MALIK
I won’t.

SAFIYA
I’ll swim.

MALIK
I’ll sink.

SAFIYA
I’ll sin.

MALIK
I think not.

SAFIYA
I think still.

MALIK
I pray not.

SAFIYA
I fear prey still.
MALIK
Silly.

SAFIYA
Song.

MALIK
Sought.

SAFIYA
Sword!

MALIK
Where?!

[He looks around, can’t find any.]
Come with me.

SAFIYA
Where?

MALIK
To Cairo. I think I have another promotion coming up.

SAFIYA
We’re leaving soon. Besides, you got promoted last week.

MALIK
And I will next week as well.

SAFIYA
But this is this week now.

MALIK
Now?

SAFIYA
Never.

MALIK
So you won’t?

SAFIYA
I will.

MALIK
I’m disappointed.
SAFIYA
I’m dissipated.

MALIK
I can help you. There’s enough pain to go around.

SAFIYA
Enough for me.

MALIK
Throw it in the sea.

SAFIYA
I’d sooner throw myself.

[EL CAPTAIN’s boat is thrown on stage. SAFIYA and MALIK regard it in a puzzled manner. Beat. Enter AMAL.]

AMAL
I once saw a black and white taxi crash into a shiny new Lada and I asked them if they needed help, but they laughed the night away and I was left with nothing but a somber Moon.

SAFIYA
[Softly]
Amar, ya mama.

AMAL
Not now, dear.

MALIK
I hear it calling.

AMAL
Then maybe you should leave.

MALIK
Maybe I should.

SAFIYA
Shuffle.

[MALIK walks to a far corner of the stage and gives his back to SAFIYA and AMAL.]

Mother.
AMAL
Yes, dear.

SAFIYA
Don’t call me that.

AMAL
Will I call you by your name then?

SAFIYA
I may not answer.

AMAL
No one ever does.

[AMAL sits in the boat. SAFIYA sits on the bench.]

SAFIYA
Now that’s just not true.

AMAL
This place was built on red bricks, you know. Now it’s something else.

SAFIYA
As am I.

AMAL
Might I?

SAFIYA
Might, you.

AMAL
Come back.

SAFIYA
Unlikely.

AMAL
I can’t leave your brother.

SAFIYA
Nor do you need to.
AMAL
I remember when I needed things.

SAFIYA
When was that?

AMAL
Some time ago.

SAFIYA
Ages.

AMAL
Again.

SAFIYA
Aromatic.

AMAL
I can smell it in the air.

SAFIYA
The air is coarse, mother.

AMAL
As it is everywhere.

SAFIYA
Not there.

AMAL
Where?

SAFIYA
When.

AMAL
Hell or high water.

SAFIYA
I’d rather get to heaven.

AMAL
One day, child.
SAFIYA
Chance.

AMAL
A dastard.

SAFIYA
Demented.

AMAL
Demonym.

SAFIYA
I am a Kawtharian, am I not?

AMAL
I am of Kawthar. I wish you were more nationalistic, dear.

SAFIYA
I don’t care much for anthems.

AMAL
Not all countries have one.

SAFIYA
Courtly.

AMAL
Common.

SAFIYA
Count your blessings.

AMAL
I do it in my sleep.

SAFIYA
This country slept once, right?

AMAL
I wouldn’t remember.

SAFIYA
Neither would I.
AMAL
How does it go again?

SAFIYA
[Thinks for a second.]
Ya Masr, oumi we sheddi el heil-

AMAL
[Getting up from the boat.]
No, that’s not right.

[Gets up from the bench and sits in the boat. AMAL sits on the bench.]

SAFIYA
What do you remember?

AMAL
Sadat’s body.

MALIK
[Moving closer to them.]
Where was I in all this?

AMAL
We live by the sea.

MALIK
A likely story.

[MALIK joins SAFIYA in the boat.]

SAFIYA
The tide grows weary.

MALIK
Shall we sail?

AMAL
No! You children are not ready! This is not the time.

MALIK
Hardly.
SAFIYA
Heroic. I live for your voice, mother. What happened to Om Kalthoum?

AMAL
The acoustic’s aren’t right.

MALIK
We’ll build you new ones!

AMAL
Out of what?

MALIK
[Looks around then looks at the boat.]
This perhaps!

AMAL
Perfect!

SAFIYA
No!
[Beat.]
Come with me.

MALIK
Where?

SAFIYA
Do you remember Farouk?

MALIK
Silence!

AMAL
Somber.

MALIK
I won’t accept this.

SAFIYA
You don’t have to.

MALIK
That’s a silly idea.
AMAL
So was seventy-three.

MALIK
[Gets up from the boat.]
Why is that?

[AMAL is about to speak, but instead walks up to the pool, picks one of the floating party cups, fills it with water and hurls the water at MALIK’s face.]

SAFIYA
Wafting.

[MALIK, silent, simply walks off stage without responding to either of them. From the other side of the stage, EL CAPTAIN enters.]

EL CAPTAIN
Alhamdulillah, I thought he would never leave.

SAFIYA
I want to leave.

EL CAPTAIN
Don’t we all?

AMAL
Allusions.

EL CAPTAIN
No?

AMAL
Good riddance.

EL CAPTAIN
Ridiculous.

AMAL
You were always.

EL CAPTAIN
I wanted the water.
AMAL
As did I.

EL CAPTAIN
You didn’t when the ship was sinking.

AMAL
Sought after.

SAFIYA
Mother-

AMAL
Not now, child.

EL CAPTAIN
Father-

AMAL
Not now, child!

SAFIYA
When?

EL CAPTAIN
A long time ago. We were clad in chainmail. Then they came with guns. I was there to see the monarchy. I was there when men still spoke in hushed tones amongst themselves, afraid of who might be listening. Have you ever seen a Philosopher Rex up close? It is a gruesome sight. Teeth bared. Eyes squinting. Aflaton never made much sense in translation. I was there for it all. A sight for the silence. I speak now when I can.

AMAL
I’ve been speaking before you and it hasn’t done me much good.

EL CAPTAIN
It won’t.

AMAL
Will it?
SAFIYA
Whimsical.

EL CAPTAIN
What would you know?

SAFIYA
I know you saw Nixon in seventy-four. I know he waved to the crowd and you smiled.

EL CAPTAIN
Similes.

AMAL
Salutations.

SAFIYA
Salam.

AMAL
I greet the land when it lets me.

SAFIYA
It’s the other way around with me.

AMAL
Funny little mix-up.

EL CAPTAIN
I’ve seen plenty of those. Once, I saw a chamber being mistaken for a chicken. It flapped its wing and bared its golden beak. Its red eyes flared with fury. I feared for my life, but went in anyway.

AMAL
Amorous.

SAFIYA
Amateur.

EL CAPTAIN
Auzubillah. Have you ever even had a job?

SAFIYA
Once. I kept it in my pocket where it smiled at me and
kissed me by the morning light. This was before I learned to fear the Sun.

AMAL
Find solace in your sustenance, child. The sun gives what it gives and takes what it takes.

EL CAPTAIN
I tried to do the same, but to no avail.

SAFIYA
Try again!

EL CAPTAIN
Oh, no, it’s much too late for that now.

AMAL
Dawn is coming.

EL CAPTAIN
And Dawn is death.

SAFIYA
[Saying it perplexedly.]
Everyone knows that.

EL CAPTAIN
Indeed, everyone does know that.

AMAL
I’d argue everyone seems to know that.

EL CAPTAIN
But by virtue of them seeming to know it, does that not give them the adequate means to adequately know it.

AMAL
I don’t know.

EL CAPTAIN
What do you know?

AMAL
I know I sang the anthem every day in school. I saw the flag waving, bright crimson in the sky. I wanted to go out
like that, with the poise of a cosmic thing, too elegant to pass away quietly.

EL CAPTAIN
I’m a man of my own water.

SAFIYA
I have never heard of such a thing.

EL CAPTAIN
Nor will you. We don’t discuss such matters here.

AMAL
Where?

EL CAPTAIN
[Rushes over to her and places his hand onto her mouth.] Bas! They’ll hear us.

AMAL
[Slapping his hand away.] Let them. Those who seek me know where I am.

[AMAL joins SAFIYA in the boat and holds her tightly.]

EL CAPTAIN
I admire your motherhood.

AMAL
You should try it sometime.

EL CAPTAIN
In another life, perhaps.

AMAL
[Rushes over to him and places a hand on his mouth.] Hush! They’ll hear us.

EL CAPTAIN
Are you sure?

AMAL
Yes, everyone knows that.

SAFIYA
Indeed, everyone does know that.
AMAL
It is quite known that everyone knows that.

SAFIYA
I have never known anyone who did not know that.

EL CAPTAIN
I did not know that everyone knew that.

AMAL
Would you like to know why?

EL CAPTAIN
When?

AMAL
A long time ago.

SAFIYA
[She tries to jerk the boat forward with her legs.]
Far away?

AMAL
No, it was right here.

EL CAPTAIN
Are you sure it wasn’t over there?

AMAL
Where?

SAFIYA
By the sea?

AMAL
I don’t see any sea.

SAFIYA
That’s because you’re looking at the water.

EL CAPTAIN
Yes, you need to be looking at the salt.

AMAL
I have seen enough salt in my life.
EL CAPTAIN
Yes, but have you tasted it?

AMAL
Not recently.

SAFIYA
Can I make you something?

AMAL
What kind of thing?

SAFIYA
Preferably edible.

AMAL
I’d rather not.

EL CAPTAIN
What do you usually eat?

AMAL
Usually my words. They move around in my stomach, but I thank them for it.

SAFIYA
Sometimes they even politely respond.

AMAL
Only children do that.

EL CAPTAIN
I didn’t know children did things.

AMAL
Oh, many things indeed. Safiya, show him what you can do.

[SAFIYA stands up and begins waltzing with an invisible partner. She dances around AMAL and EL CAPTAIN.]

EL CAPTAIN
I see.

AMAL
Where?
SAFIYA
[Still dancing.]
There!

AMAL
I don’t see it.

EL CAPTAIN
Look closer.

AMAL
I’m trying.

[AMAL approaches the water and looks down steadily. She touches it with the tip of her toe before scurrying back center stage. SAFIYA stops dancing.]

SAFIYA
What is it, mother?

AMAL
I saw something horrible in there.

EL CAPTAIN
[Seriously.]
Was it your reflection?

AMAL
Something like that. Can the Moon refract?

SAFIYA
El Amar, ya mama. And only when it’s sad.

EL CAPTAIN
I was sad once.

AMAL
As was I.

EL CAPTAIN
What happened?

AMAL
[Ponders for a second.]
You first.
EL CAPTAIN
Fine. The Israelis invaded Sinai so we waited six years then took it back. It was very cathartic.

[Beat.]
Yourself?

AMAL
This place isn’t as it used to be.

[Enter MALIK. He is dressed in a blood-red belly dancing costume. The skirt is long and the chest piece is over his military shirt. As soon as she sees him, SAFIYA yelps, rushes off stage and comes back with a goblet drum.]

EL CAPTAIN
Who are you?

MALIK
I am your son.

AMAL
I didn’t know that.

EL CAPTAIN
I might have.

AMAL
You should have told me.

EL CAPTAIN
This look suits you well.

AMAL
What a delight.

MALIK
Thank you, they ordered me to do it.

AMAL
Why the hell would they?

MALIK
Why the hell wouldn’t they?
SAFIYA
[Clears throat. Everyone looks at her.]
Shall we?

MALIK
Of course.

[He raises his hands in formation. SAFIYA begins banging the drum and MALIK begins dancing to it, following the rhythm perfectly, swishing his hips at AMAL and EL CAPTAIN.]

EL CAPTAIN
Most excellent.

AMAL
Most experiential.

EL CAPTAIN
I applaud.

AMAL
I’m appalled.

[AMAL and EL CAPTAIN get down on their knee around MALIK, who continues to dance to the drum beat, and pull stacks of seashells from their pockets. One by one, they begin flicking them at MALIK. SAFIYA’s playing increases in intensity and MALIK’s body follows suit. The speed increases until it crescendos. MALIK ends the dance with his arm spread wide, hands convulsed and upright. EL CAPTAIN and AMAL stand back up.]

EL CAPTAIN
Wonderful!

AMAL
Wicked!

EL CAPTAIN
I am lost for words.

AMAL
I’ve found the ones I need.
EL CAPTAIN
Do you have them?

AMAL
Not on me.

MALIK
[Curtseying to both of them.]
Thank you, both. So much.

SAFIYA
[Putting the drum aside, gets up and begins clapping.]
Bravo! What an exquisite debut!

MALIK
[Turns sharply around to face her.]
Silence!

[They all grow silent. MALIK looks from SAFIYA to AMAL to EL CAPTAIN. Beat.]

MALIK
The oasis through the date trees. The date trees in the oasis.

AMAL
[Approaching him.]
Do you need a drink?
[She holds his hands, turns them upside down and drops them.]
They look fine to me.

MALIK
[Crosses his arms.]
Ahha. What would you know?

[Face unchanged, AMAL slaps him across the face. MALIK does not react.]

AMAL
Ask the water next time.

EL CAPTAIN
Or the fire.
Safiya
Where?

Malik
[Throwing his arms in the air.]
Here! It’s all here.

Safiya
I’ve never heard of such a thing.

Amal
Audio.

El Captain
Audacious.

Amal
Well, we won’t stop you.

[Holding one another, Amal and El Captain exit. El Captain rushes back in and drags his boat out. Beat.]

Safiya
You look well, brother.

Malik
What?

Safiya
Wild.

Malik
Woeful.

Safiya
Wilderness.

Malik
Wanton.

Safiya
Wilding.

Malik
Wondrous.
SAFIYA
Wilder.

MALIK
[Beat. He sits on the bench.]
Sometimes, I wish I could just be civilized.

SAFIYA
[She joins him.]
Have some manners.

MALIK
Matter of fact.

SAFIYA
I don’t like facts.

MALIK
Funny.

SAFIYA
They slip between my fingers like dew at dawn.

MALIK
Dawn is decadent.

SAFIYA
So come with me.

MALIK
Where?

SAFIYA
I don’t know. Tell me, do you prefer the Mediterranean or the Red?

MALIK
Neither. One’s too European. The other’s too Arab.

SAFIYA
You need an ocean.

MALIK
That sounds fun.
SAFIYA
Wait till you hear it up close.

MALIK
Here?

SAFIYA
No, there.

MALIK
Where?

SAFIYA
I don’t know.

MALIK
Let me know when you do.

[He gets up and is about to walk off stage when SAFIYA grabs him by the arm.]

MALIK
Ha?

SAFIYA
Halt.

MALIK
Should I?

SAFIYA
Only if you want to.

MALIK
[Ponders.]
Give me a reason.

SAFIYA
How about oil? How about Shiite forces moving as we speak?
How about a burning cathedral? What of this dress?
[Points to her clothes.]
What of that?
[Points to MALIK.]
What about the air force? Siwa? Fossils in Wadi El Natrun?
[Desperately.]
Faloukas at the bottom of the river? Iblis in the township? Privatized sight and sound? Chahine’s dead. All this, and you stand with two feet? Fire in your eyes? What of mine? What of Little Armenia? I see the Sun, brother. I see the Sun and the Moon and they see me back, call me by my name as it is. Be sinful. Hear that nightingale. Faten would be proud. Look at that horizon. Won’t you be horizontal with me?

[Beat.]

MALIK
Goodbye.

[MALIK exits. SAFIYA sighs. Beat. AMAL and EL CAPTAIN come skipping in.]

AMAL & EL CAPTAIN
Hello, child.

SAFIYA
Who are you?

AMAL
Your parents.

EL CAPTAIN
Parenthetically.

AMAL
So they say.

EL CAPTAIN
So do we.

AMAL
Haven’t we done well?

EL CAPTAIN
I know I have, what about you?

SAFIYA
I haven’t done anything recently.

AMAL
Well, that’s just not true.
EL CAPTAIN
Not at all.

AMAL
You brought us back together.

EL CAPTAIN
Tumultuously.

AMAL
What a time.

EL CAPTAIN
Truly.

AMAL
We have you to thank, child.

AMAL & EL CAPTAIN
Thank you, child.

SAFIYA
It’s not my fault.

AMAL
It’s fine.

EL CAPTAIN
Forward.

[Holding AMAL, he lurches forward.]

AMAL
Forever.

SAFIYA
Khan is also dead.

AMAL
But he wishes you well, nonetheless.

EL CAPTAIN
As do we.

[Picks up the guidebook.]
Have you read from this book before?
SAFIYA
I only read what I find in the sand.

AMAL
Well, we’ll have to change that.

EL CAPTAIN
Quite instantly.

AMAL
And interestingly.

SAFIYA
I have no interest.

EL CAPTAIN
Oh, do you?

AMAL
I sure don’t.

EL CAPTAIN
But I do sometimes.

AMAL
[To EL CAPTAIN.]
That’s why I sought you.

EL CAPTAIN
Somber.

AMAL
Soliloquy.

EL CAPTAIN
Sonnet of the night.

AMAL
I prefer ghazals.

SAFIYA
If I write for you, will that be enough?

AMAL
Surely.
EL CAPTAIN
Most certainly.

SAFIYA
[Picks up the bottle by the bench and gets up to offer it to them.]
Here.

AMAL
Where?

EL CAPTAIN
I don’t hear anything.

SAFIYA
Listen closer.

AMAL
I’d rather not.

EL CAPTAIN
I’d sooner not.

SAFIYA
Then come with me.

AMAL
I suppose.

EL CAPTAIN
I surrender.

AMAL
Would you?

EL CAPTAIN
For you, I suppose.

[They kiss tenderly while SAFIYA still holds out the bottle. After they pull apart, AMAL takes the bottle from her.]

AMAL
A worthy word.
EL CAPTAIN
Truly poetic.

AMAL
We will compose for a coronation.

EL CAPTAIN
Candid corner.

AMAL
Find me a coroner.

EL CAPTAIN
Wouldn’t that be nice?

AMAL
Haven’t we done well?

SAFIYA
Will you come with me?

EL CAPTAIN
Why, of course.

AMAL
Now, why wouldn’t we.

EL CAPTAIN
I suppose we could find a reason if we look for it.

AMAL
Where?

EL CAPTAIN
Well, right here, of course.

AMAL
I see no reason.

EL CAPTAIN
I hear no reason.

SAFIYA
Then it’s settled, then.
AMAL
All land was settled at some point.

EL CAPTAIN
Even this.

AMAL
I’d rather you don’t get so fired up, dear.

EL CAPTAIN
I’ll try not to.

AMAL
I know you will.

EL CAPTAIN
I know you won’t.

AMAL
Won’t you?

EL CAPTAIN
I want to.

SAFIYA
Haven’t you done well?

AMAL & EL CAPTAIN
We have!

AMAL
Quite well, actually.

EL CAPTAIN
I don’t remember the last time I did quite so well.

AMAL
But now, I am done.

EL CAPTAIN
Derivatively.

AMAL
Quite dexterous.
EL CAPTAIN
Anthropomorphic. I looked for a unified anthropological theory once.

AMAL
Oh?

EL CAPTAIN
It didn’t work out so well.

AMAL
Well, you never worked that much.

EL CAPTAIN
Hardly.

AMAL
As a matter of fact, I think I had it the hardest.

EL CAPTAIN
You did have a lot.

SAFIYA
Haven’t you?

AMAL
Only when I didn’t.

EL CAPTAIN
Only when she didn’t.

SAFIYA
Didn’t you?

AMAL
I did.

EL CAPTAIN
She did.

SAFIYA
Shall we?

AMAL & EL CAPTAIN
We shall!
[They move together towards off stage, but suddenly halt and begin walking backwards slowly, raising their hands up as they do so. Enter MALIK. He is still in the same belly dancing costume and is now holding the same toy gun from earlier aimed directly at them. He is walking steadily as though he is marching. As they talk, they circle around the stage in this position continuously.]

AMAL
Come now.

EL CAPTAIN
Courage.

AMAL
Compassion.

EL CAPTAIN
Countenance.

AMAL
Sustenance.

MALIK
Have you received your visas, yet?

AMAL
No, but I have a blessing.

MALIK
That doesn’t do much for paperwork.

AMAL
Would you like some paper, dear?

MALIK
No, thank you.

EL CAPTAIN
How about some pompous?

MALIK
Another time, maybe.

AMAL
Tantamount.
EL CAPTAIN
I don’t find this very tantalizing.

SAFIYA
[Nervously.]
Talk.

MALIK
The herb growing on the curb is getting on my nerve.

AMAL
Cut it off then.

EL CAPTAIN
Burn it down.

SAFIYA
I’d sooner see you burst than drown.

MALIK
That won’t be necessary.

AMAL
Few things are.

EL CAPTAIN
I reckon not.

AMAL
I really don’t.

SAFIYA
Malik, calm down and hear a song.

MALIK
It’s quiet in Cairo.

EL CAPTAIN
Fair point.

AMAL
Quite light.

EL CAPTAIN
Blinding even.
AMAL
I wouldn’t go that far.

EL CAPTAIN
I would just a bit.

AMAL
But not too much.

EL CAPTAIN
Oh, no. Just a bit.

AMAL
Tiny.

EL CAPTAIN
Tiring.

AMAL
Touring.

SAFIYA
Won’t you touch?

MALIK
I touch only what I breathe. What is dead may never croak in the evening. I look forward to dawn and all its somber tomorrows. I find solace in the salvage.

AMAL
Sanctimonious.

EL CAPTAIN
Cerebral.

AMAL
I found my mind once.

EL CAPTAIN
How was that?

AMAL
It sent you its regards.

EL CAPTAIN
Send mine back.
AMAL
Not likely right now.

EL CAPTAIN
No, not soon.

AMAL
Summon.

SAFIYA
I seek words.

MALIK
That never amounts to much.

AMAL
Only because you don’t add enough.

EL CAPTAIN
Mathematics were never your forte.

AMAL
I tried.

EL CAPTAIN
I toiled.

AMAL
What have you done, my child?

EL CAPTAIN
What will you do when the Nile dries?

MALIK
I’ll use diplomatic force.

SAFIYA
You won’t. Trust me, I’ve tried.

MALIK
Tentatively.

AMAL
Traumatically.
EL CAPTAIN
We all have our demons.

AMAL
Have you seen mine lately?

EL CAPTAIN
I’m sure they’re around somewhere.

AMAL
Let me know where they are.

EL CAPTAIN
Do you need them?

AMAL
No, but it would be nice to know they’re there if I do.

SAFIYA
Lounge and let lounge, brother.

MALIK
I would, but living rooms are expensive.

AMAL
And we have been very grateful for that.

EL CAPTAIN
Truly.

AMAL
But now it is time we be gratuitous.

EL CAPTAIN
Grainy.

AMAL
Grotesque.

EL CAPTAIN
As the bottom of the sea.

SAFIYA
Have you seen the floor, brother?
MALIK
I’d rather not. I know a flash when I hear it.

SAFIYA
What of the dark?

MALIK
What of the candle?

SAFIYA
I fail to follow your rhetoric.

MALIK
[Sighs.]
If a candle burns at two ends surely this must mean we face yet another economic meltdown or as the falah would put it, a rather monstrous malady that threatens to mutate the very existence of our mutuality. If then, by the transitive property of being, we are all children of some sort, I must conclude that the only way to love, and truly love, is to listen to a treacherous tightrope slinging across a bridge, maybe Kasr El-Nil, in the afterword. Only then can a conclusion be conquered.

SAFIYA
Save and let save, brother.

AMAL
Salvation is juicy.

EL CAPTAIN
I run out of stock soon.

AMAL
Wring out the right.

EL CAPTAIN
Rupture.

AMAL
Orangutan.

EL CAPTAIN
Tangerine.
AMAL
Pastrami.

SAFIYA
Delicious.

AMAL
And devious.

EL CAPTAIN
Watch out.

AMAL
Why? Does he have a gun?

[MALIK shoots AMAL. She cries in pain, before dropping to the floor, lifeless. EL CAPTAIN seems shocked, but remains silent.]

EL CAPTAIN
What of my mother and-

[MALIK shoots EL CAPTAIN. He also cries out in pain, but slightly longer than AMAL did. It recedes into a rumbling groan. He falls to the floor besides her, lifeless. SAFIYA crouches in the corner, shivering.]

MALIK
[Looking over their bodies.]
Did you know the Russians almost brought a nuke to Alexandria? I prayed for the fallout. What lives may never sing.

[He looks towards SAFIYA.]
And you? What of your sacred?

SAFIYA
[Gradually and quickly growing calmer, she approaches him.]
Forgive me, walahy, I haven’t read enough recently. Give me my leave and I will go find a newspaper.

MALIK
I think you missed the morning run.

SAFIYA
What can I say? I feed the body that holds me.
MALIK
So it goes.

SAFIYA
So it always has.

MALIK
It’s well known, you know.

SAFIYA
Only here.

MALIK
No.

SAFIYA
Yes.

MALIK
Oh, no.

SAFIYA
Indeed, yes.

MALIK
Yearn.

SAFIYA
Yellow.

MALIK
Yet.

SAFIYA
I wonder.

MALIK
That’s quite enough.

SAFIYA
What of the wicked?

MALIK
I know not.
SAFIYA
Think harder.

MALIK
That would be inadvisable.

SAFIYA
Have you ever breathed air so coarse, you found yourself caught in its grasp?

MALIK
I do miss Cairo.

SAFIYA
Perhaps. But perhaps you also took the wrong train.

MALIK
I couldn’t have.

SAFIYA
So to speak, of course.

MALIK
Words aren’t worthless.

SAFIYA
Even in sentences?

MALIK
I tried writing my best, and when I didn’t succeed I decided to become a barometer.

SAFIYA
Read me.

MALIK
I struggle with language.

SAFIYA
Then ask me.

MALIK
I have orders not to.

SAFIYA
Then make me.
MALIK
I’d rather not.

SAFIYA
I will not be stopped.

MALIK
Neither will I.

SAFIYA
But you will be sought.

MALIK
Maybe tomorrow.

SAFIYA
Maybe now.

MALIK
Try me.

SAFIYA
Triangular.

MALIK
Untrue.

SAFIYA
Untold.

MALIK
Unnecessary.

SAFIYA
Unfold.

MALIK
Not now.

SAFIYA
Always.

MALIK
What do you want?
SAFIYA
I’m not hungry right now, thank you.

MALIK
Have you a match?

SAFIYA
I light with my finger.

MALIK
I’m afraid that won’t do.

SAFIYA
Very well.

MALIK
Could be better.

SAFIYA
I suppose.

MALIK
I sought.

SAFIYA
And you were left wanting.

MALIK
True.

SAFIYA
Tantamount.

MALIK
Tantalizing.

SAFIYA
Get on with it.

[Holding the gun forward, MALIK moves a step to adjust his position, but he trips on his skirt and falls into the water. He screams and splashes about. Seeing the opportunity, SAFIYA grabs the gun and shoots him three times. MALIK’s body lies lifeless. She breathes heavily. Beat. Enter AHLAM with another corked bottle. She does not seem to notice the bodies.]
AHLAM
Oh, hello.

SAFIYA
Hell-o.

AHLAM
Not so much.

SAFIYA
Nautical.

AHLAM
Somewhat.

SAFIYA
Will you soothe me?

AHLAM
I will try. This is for you.

[AHLAM hands SAFIYA the bottle. As with before, she opens it and it contains what appears to be a ticket. SAFIYA holds it in her hands and looks at it intently.]

SAFIYA
[Looking up.]
Are you sure?

AHLAM
I suppose I am.

SAFIYA
I don’t know if I can.

AHLAM
It’s really easy.

SAFIYA
I encourage that.

AHLAM
Yallah.

SAFIYA
Step?
AHLAM
One.
[SAFIYA begins walking towards the theatre’s exit door.]
Two. Three.
[SAFIYA stops.]
And so on.

SAFIYA
Do you know what day it is today?

AHLAM
I never cared much for politics.

SAFIYA
Myself, I like geography.

AHLAM
Where?

SAFIYA
Wherever, I suppose.

AHLAM
Maybe I’ll see you there.

[SAFIYA nods and looks back at the door. She is about to walk out again, but hurriedly turns back to the bench. She picks up her book, and looks at the pile of suitcases for a moment, before choosing a random one to take with her. She steps forward and exits the theater. AHLAM restarts her counting, but this time in Arabic. The lights begin to dim as she continues counting. In the dark, she continues to count for a few beats, her voice gradually lowering in volume. Finally, silence.]

FIN
ON WRITING BARZAKH: THE SEARCH FOR AN EGYPTIAN-AMERICAN ABSURDISM

The seeds of this project were planted in the Spring of 2016. I was enrolled in Professor Matthew Tremé’s *The Absurdity of Modernity*, a survey course that primarily dealt with the phenomenon commonly known as the Theatre of the Absurd. In addition, it also tackled various Absurdist texts, from Camus’s foundational *Myth of Sisyphus*, all the way to more obscure, yet nonetheless influential titles, such as Osvaldo Dragún’s *Three Stories*.

With the exception of Tom Stoppard’s classic *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, I had not encountered much Absurdist work before this class. I discovered an odd clarity in these works: a resonance I had simply never found in more logical and linear theatre. There was potent familiarity in completely bizarre characters like Beckett’s Pozzo and Ionesco’s Fire Chief. As a bilingual member of the Egyptian diaspora, I found Beckett and Ionesco particularly engaging; the way their work used language and chaos to create a profound sense of alienation and disconnection felt eerily relatable. I then found myself asking: why had I not encountered similar work that spoke to my specific experience?

Absurdist techniques have, of course, travelled far and wide. In Egypt alone, writers like Tawfiq al-Hakim and Lenin El Ramly wrote in very similar styles to the Theatre of the Absurd. But their work did not commit nearly as thoroughly to the absurdity of reality as Beckett and Ionesco did. Their writing style certainly employed absurdity but was not exactly Absurdist. By that I mean it embodied the aesthetic style of
Absurdist work, but still operated with a certain level of standard logic. A prime example of this critical difference would be El Ramly’s *A Point of View*, a play set in a nursing home for blind people. Though the play uses fairly standard techniques of Absurdity in the way it explores blindness both physically and conceptually, through both language and space, it ends with a didactic, indicting political message on the ‘blindness’ of authority.

I do not make this distinction in order to belittle al-Hakim or El Ramly’s work in any way, rather to simply illustrate that it left me wanting in the same way the Theatre of the Absurd did. I craved the aesthetic and philosophical framework of the latter, but with the relatable cultural context of the former. This thirst prompted me to explore the possibilities of that combination in my own writing. My first experiment was in Professor Tremé’s class. For our final, we were given the option to write a creative piece that would demonstrate our grasp of the concepts we had been discussing throughout the semester. I decided to write a short, two-scene play titled *Sisyphus El Masri*.

The title is a double entendre. On the one hand, El Masri is a common last name throughout the Arab world, on the other, it literally translates to ‘the Egyptian’. The play reimagined Sisyphus as a common Egyptian man whose ‘punishment’ is to sit on a street bench and have small pebbles thrown at him for an indefinite period of time. Once the throwing stops, he must then collect the pebbles and dispose of them before sitting down again on the street bench. Of course, the pebbles get thrown once again. So on and so forth.
Sisyphus El Masri was a precursor to Barzakh in several ways. It was the first work I had ever written in which I consciously tried to emulate an Absurdist style for the specific task of communicating the violence and turbulence of the contemporary Egyptian experience. Secondly, it featured two characters, Safiya and Malik, that I would later use again in Barzakh. The former acted as a quasi-love interest to Sisyphus, while the latter was, of course, the officer who tried to arrest him.

Though writing Sisyphus El Masri was nothing short of cathartic, the work ultimately felt limited. With further study, I was able to identify that this doubt was due to my firm reliance on symbolism and didacticism. Malik, for example, functioned more as a symbol of military corruption than he did as a character in a space and narrative. There was a similar issue with Willie, the character I used as a representation of English colonialism. Though the language in which they both spoke was chaotic and contradictory, their political role in the play was nonetheless made explicitly meaningful. Hence, the play did not achieve the desired effect of a formally Absurdist work; one that does not attempt to provide any sort of solution to the chaos its subjects experience. The core of this project was to produce a work that could pay homage to the Theatre of the Absurd, but also speak directly to a contemporary Egyptian cultural context.

For most of the project, I wanted to write a ‘Postcolonial Absurdist’ play. As I understood the material at the beginning of the project, this meant that I wanted to write using the literary and theatrical techniques of the Theatre of the Absurd with the theoretical and historical framework of postcolonialism. In short, I wanted to produce a work that would find a home in both. But this desire seemed paradoxical. Absurdism, especially as practiced by the likes of Beckett and Ionesco, depends on lucidity and
spontaneity, and is not interested in being restricted by theoretical frameworks. And yet, the entire point of the project seemed to necessitate writing through a well thought-out theoretical framework of postcolonial Egypt. To solve this dilemma, I strived to further my understanding of my Absurdist idols’ work.

In reading Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Adamov, I was stunned by the specificity of each writer’s take on Absurdism. This observation challenged my initial perception of Absurdism as a quasi-genre. Though the Theatre of the Absurd has enough overlapping techniques and sceneries to constitute some form of common ground, it lacks any sort of reproducible structure the way other, more established, theatrical genres, such as tragedies or musicals, have. Because Absurdist writing can only be produced through a lucid relationship with one’s present, every work is extraordinarily particular to its author and the space they occupy in their time and place.

Every Absurdist work is a product of its author’s relationship with their zeitgeist. In this sense, I began to think of multiple ‘Absurdisms’ as opposed to a single, definite notion of the style. Beckett had his *own* Absurdism, rising from his position as an Irish immigrant in Paris whose first language was not French. Adamov’s Absurdism was specific to his lifelong long battle with mental illness, as well as its intersection with his upbringing in a wealthy family that would eventually lose its privilege. Genet’s Absurdism would have been completely different had he been a heterosexual man who was never imprisoned for his sexuality. While each of these ‘Absurdisms’ rises out of a common philosophical school of thought and inevitably uses similar techniques, each one is ultimately its very own aesthetic and dramatic force.
This realization drastically changed my approach to the project. For much of it, I was trying to find a way to ‘update’ Absurdism and the techniques of the Theatre of the Absurd, but the writers I had looked up so eagerly had already left me a process through which I could produce the work I needed to write. Whereas I initially thought that I had needed to diligently apply Postcolonial Theory to *Barzakh* in order to produce a ‘Postcolonial Absurdist’ play, I eventually realized that any postcolonial subject (actively concerned with postcolonialism) who succeeds at writing an Absurdist play has written a ‘Postcolonial Absurdist’ play. Ionesco did not need any concrete anti-bourgeoisie framework to write *The Bald Soprano*, he simply needed a familiar scene to subvert and an active concern with the English bourgeoisie.

Before this realization, I was working with the false assumption that the Theatre of the Absurd was not political. It was, in fact, extremely political, especially in the way each work evades a singular, definite meaning. The Theatre of the Absurd did not leave me wanting because it was not political enough, rather because its political response was to a socio-historical and geographic space that is not relevant to me as a diasporic Muslim Egyptian living in the United States. I realized that the key to my goal of an Absurdist play in my image required that I reject any sort of mechanical or structured way of writing *Barzakh*. Understanding this, I then refocused my efforts on a reflective process that would create *Barzakh*’s universe out of my own experience and reality.

There are two primary experiences that I wanted to reflect through the style of Absurdism in *Barzakh*: the political violence of the Egyptian state and the dilemma of immigration. Specifically, I wanted to contrast those two experiences with the intense patriotism that is ubiquitous in Egyptian culture. Egyptians love calling Egypt Om el-
Donia (the Mother of the World), yet have lived under militaristic authoritarian rule for decades now. This dichotomy leads to a profound paradox in Egyptian culture in which Egyptians will heap praises upon Egypt, describing it as the cradle of civilization and the biggest Arab country, but also lambast it for being ‘behind’ and undemocratic.

As such, many Egyptians will view immigration as a means of escape from the oppressive Egyptian state. But at the same time, due to the intensity of Egyptian patriotism, they will also view immigration as a grave loss, a permanent schism from the homeland that can never be healed. This paradox continues to define my own lived experience as an Egyptian abroad. On the one hand, I long to live where in my own country, in my own city, but on the other I do not have the capacity to be constantly at risk of state violence and censorship. This paradox is made only worse by the fact that I am a writer. Given the political and economic situation in Egypt, it is actually easier for me to write about and engage with Egyptian culture in the diaspora than it is for me back home. My university gives me access to resources my peers in Cairo do not have and I am not at risk of violent state censorship. Yet, I am also severely limited. Producing work in the US for publication in the US not only means writing in English rather than Arabic, but also writing about Egypt in absence, almost out of memory.

The choice to title the play Barzakh was in direct response to the liminal nature of this diasporic space. Appearing multiple times in the Noble Qur’an, barzakh is a classical Arabic word that means both the liminal space and time the human soul spends in the grave before Judgment Day, and the invisible line that separates salt and fresh water. This is way the sight of the play, the fictional village of Kawthar, is situated in the northern Egyptian Delta. The family we follow occupies a metaphorical barzakh, one of turbulent
transition, but they also live near a literal barzakh, the invisible line between the Nile River and the Mediterranean Sea. As a space, Kawthar is an embodiment of my own diasporic stasis.

I wish to live a free and productive life, but I also wish to live in my own country. *Barzakh* is meant to occupy the space between these two irreconcilable desires, which is why it needed to be an Absurdist work. The choices I have made in crafting it, though mostly a product of rapid lucid writing, attempt to reflect the absurdity of this liminal space of political identity I occupy: one in which I am neither traditionally Egyptian nor satisfied with being American. To that end, the characters live in Egypt, but speak mostly in English. They desire to leave, but cannot seem to for whatever reason. There is no solution to this paradox, at least none that is clear to me at the moment. *Barzakh* does not look for that solution. It is an attempt to come to terms with the absurdity of that reality.
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